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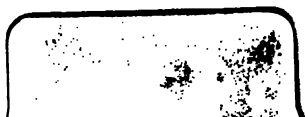
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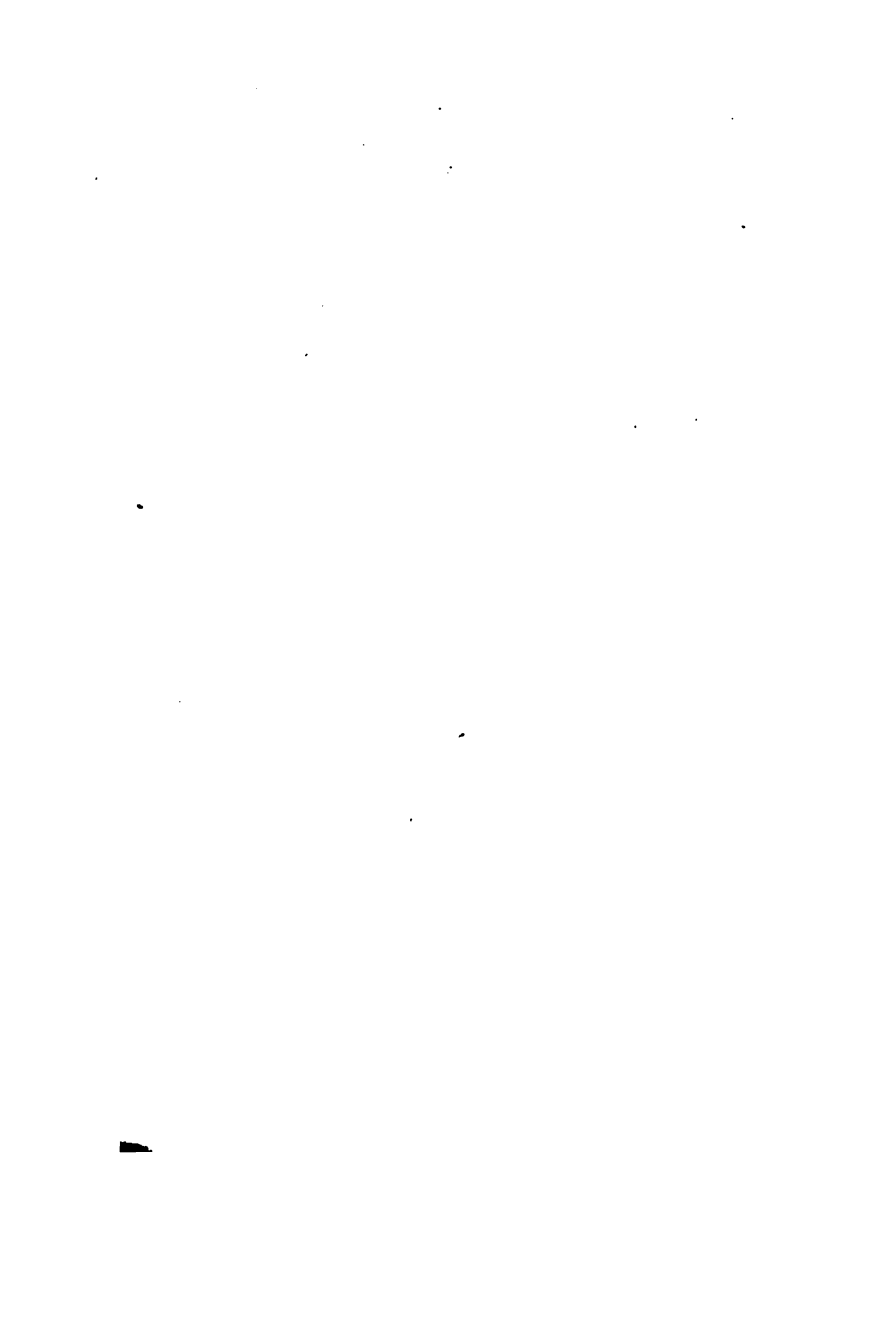




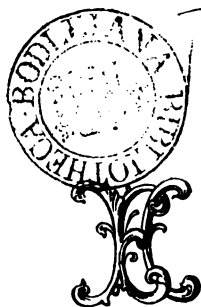
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AN ESSAY
ON THE
POETRY OF WORDSWORTH.



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THE
POETRY OF WORDSWORTH.

I.

IT is obvious that, in estimating the merits of any poet, much difficulty would be removed, and a more satisfactory conclusion reached, if we first ascertained, somewhat distinctly, *the nature and tendency of true poetry*. But this method will be found especially convenient, and is indeed necessary, for the due consideration of one whose peculiar claim to distinction is founded upon the novelty of his style, both of manner and sentiment;—for we shall thus be enabled to judge, in how far that which is original in our author is conformable to the legitimate means and objects of his art. The writings of Wordsworth form so remarkable a feature in the literature of our times; were received on their first publication with so much *unmerited*

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ridicule ; and have gradually advanced, through the reluctant consent of some, and the dawning admiration of others, to influence the minds of so large a community of admirers,—that it may be worth while to inquire, whether they have at length received their proper homage, or whether, by the exercise of great native powers in a false direction, and under the guidance of an erroneous judgment, their author has extorted an undue preference. We will own, at the outset, to a persuasion that the latter is nearer to the truth. Fully appreciating, as we do, the taste and genius which have given expression to so many noble sentiments, in language so chaste and felicitous,—and by virtue of which the sonnets of Wordsworth will ever be valued as apples of gold in frames of silver,—we believe his higher efforts to have failed, from the defectiveness of his poetic theory ; and that his works generally are characterised by the admixture of certain peculiar beauties (such as simplicity, purity of style, and the frequent choice of natural and unostentatious themes) with certain serious blemishes, pervading the whole system of his poetry, and too often leading him, by an ambitious

desire of working some great moral effects, vaguely intimated rather than defined, to overstep the legitimate boundaries of his art.

It should never be forgotten that poetry is one of the Fine Arts, and has no just pretensions to the exercise of any influence which the sister Arts do not enjoy; that is, to the exercise of any influence different in kind, however superior may be its degree. The moralist, it is true, and even the man of science, have each borrowed, for the more attractive display of his own doctrines, those extrinsic charms in which poetry, itself so subtle, is most aptly and becomingly embodied; and, to those casual admirers of poetry with whom the measured cadence and recurring rhyme are its only certain characteristics, it may appear that no science or subject whatever is of necessity excluded as a theme. To such persons it matters little whether they be led through the Paradise of Milton, or the Botanic Garden of Darwin; excepting that they would sooner weary of the inimitable beauties of the one, transplanted from the fields of nature, but cultured with an exquisite and harmonising taste, than of the labelled, formal, and unfragrant sections

of the other, fitted only for passionless and pedantic minds. The reader of cultivated taste and poetic feeling will, nevertheless, easily distinguish between the genuine character of Milton's poem, and the spurious sentiment of Darwin's: he will acknowledge, that while both are highly elaborated in expression and versification, (though with a wide difference of taste,) the art of the one is manifestly inferior to that of the other; as, in lieu of presenting a consistent and harmonious picture, like the reflection in a mirror of polished silver, he has chosen to exhibit, as in a prism, the world in its elemental, rather than its natural state. While reading the poem of Darwin, he will repeatedly experience a revulsion of feeling—from a sense of something like admiration at the glowing scenery described, to a painful conviction of the meanness of its immediate subject; and, again, from the interest excited by some curious phenomenon of physics, he will be hurried into a feeling of disappointment at the poetical evasion of his philosophy. This result is surely a sufficient proof of the unnatural effort made for the combination of categorical instruction with poetical art, and of the

folly always committed when the *universal truth* of poetry is subordinated to the *detailed facts* of science.*

* There is no real tendency in these remarks to question the poetical talent of Dr. Darwin. The method by which we have detected his deficiency in the *art*, leaves undetermined his measure of the *faculty*. That he did not possess the latter in an eminent degree is evident, from his inferior success in the former; for it is certain that great poetical powers are always accompanied by a due appreciation of their proper objects, and by their intellectual subordination and disposition to the attainment of those objects. The writings of Darwin present many evidences of a fervid imagination: and, though his inflated style so much offends the chastity of taste, there are not wanting at intervals, throughout his poems, instances of felicity both as to thought and diction, and cadences of true poetic music, which lead us to conclude that—had he, adopting a better theory of poetry, disdained to stoop and delve in comparatively barren mines of physical science, and fused into his plastic imagination the wide and varied phenomena of nature, especially in their relation to humanity, their action upon human sympathies, and their colouring derived therefrom—he might have produced a great original poem, as fresh and as true after a thousand years as on its first appearance. The following lines, offered as a sample of his poetic achievements, are perhaps the most favourable we could select in respect of taste and ability:—

“ So playful Love, on Ida's flowery sides,
With ribbon-rein th' indignant lion guides;
Pleased on his brindled back the lyre he rings,
And shakes delirious rapture from the strings;
Slow as the pausing monarch stalks along,
Sheaths his retractile claws and drinks the song,
Soft nymphs on timid steps the triumph view,
And listening fauns with beating hooves pursue;
With pointed ears th' alarmed forest starts,
And love and music soften savage hearts.”

Metaphysical poetry is obviously open to the same objection, because mental as well as physical science is conducted by an analytical process, while every branch of art demands a contrary method, which may be termed (for want of a better name) *æsthetical*. It is the province of the mental philosopher to lay bare, as with a dissecting-knife, the minutest parts of our intellectual system; to trace the arterial current of our affections to their palpitating source; and to explore those powerful springs of action which are hidden from the mere observer of their manifested results, as the nerves and sinews of the body are clothed with a substance imparting harmony and grace. The office of the poet differs from these, although his subject is identical. He, too, is devoted to the exhibition of humanity—not to its improvement or embellishment, as some suppose; nor to the mere display of its more elevated and prosperous condition. Our

This little passage must be allowed to contain many highly poetical elements;—a pleasing allegory most fortunately illustrating its intended theme; both the truth and the fiction contributing to modulate the language into something of their own symmetry and beauty, and so altogether forming (in the true spirit of Art) a gem of representative poetry.

mixed and imperfect nature is the theme of the poet, as well as of the philosopher; but while the latter, exposing the seat of every function, shows what man is able and designed to do, the former, animating by a Promethean heat his own life-like creation, presents us with man in action, or breathing and pulsating at the least, doing according to the prompting of passion or of reason, and developing his internal structure only by the movements in which his powers are exerted. Metaphor apart—the philosopher instructs by axiom and theorem, the poet by example: the science of the one is perfect, in proportion as the peculiar truth is presented in its completeness with brevity and precision; the art of the other is consummate when some phase of life is so illustrated that all essentials are preserved in few particulars,—the results of any length of time, and any number of circumstances, being fully reflected within the limits of a brief and uncrowded picture.

The application of these remarks to moral science and religious truth requires only to be mentioned, and not further insisted upon; and the reader will thus have followed us to a point to

which we shall have occasion to return. All poetry may (and undoubtedly should) be essentially accordant with religion. But it must not profess too much, or it will perform too little. Poetry must reflect, and not propound; illustrate, and not dogmatise. In one branch only may the highest themes be safely dwelt upon,—namely, in that of strictly *devotional* poetry; a species of the first excellence, but peculiar in its nature, as demanding the inspiration of the saint, as well as that of the bard. Collaterally, sacred thoughts and allusions may be in strict keeping: always should the work of the poet, as a whole, profoundly harmonise with Scripture truth. Still poetry is an art,—nothing less, and nothing more: and its moral influence, when exercised as such, is sufficiently great and manifest without suffering it to trespass upon the higher province of religious doctrine, — thus losing its own characteristic excellence, and (which is a far more serious consideration) compromising the dignity and value of religion itself. All didactic poetry is as distant in its relation to poetic art, as geometrical drawing is in regard to the art of painting; but theology, of

all subjects, is that which would admit of the fewest ornaments in verse. The admirable poems of Cowper are therefore *sui generis*, and must be allowed to stand alone, apart from all imitation, because they resulted from a union of gifts which the poetic character does not commonly include, nor from its own proper exercise require. The drama of the *Tempest*, removed as it is from emulation by its unrivalled beauty, is yet a more exact poetic model than *The Task*. Moreover, as a professed teacher, the poet may err as readily as far less gifted men. He will perhaps more frequently produce the erroneous philosophy of the *Essay on Man*, than the scriptural morality of the poem on *Truth*; and, most assuredly, he cannot exercise his highest poetical functions while soberly enforcing a doctrine that admits of neither embellishment nor reserve. Intent upon producing faithful works of art, he cannot fail of communicating a powerful moral in the guise of parable or story; and then his incidental allusions to Divine truth will (as in the works of Shakspeare) be all the more useful, as they may serve to show how distinct are the fruits of human fancy, and the

speculations of literary minds, from a Revelation sent direct from God. This distinction is, unhappily, overlooked by certain authors in the present day; and the consequence is, that many professors of literary art, mistaking its very nature and vocation, are repeatedly teaching that it is not merely adapted to meliorate and raise the condition of man in society, but that it includes and enforces the highest moral truths of which he is susceptible. The lamentable failure of every such system of ethics is twofold, as it involves both a departure from artistic beauty and a renunciation of revealed truth. How unsatisfactory are all literary works which, by tone and implication, profess to realise the highest aspirations of mankind! How delightful and improving, on the other hand, are those authors who, if they anywhere cease to reflect from their chambers of imagery the many-figured treasures of nature, history, and life, do by reverent intimations point us to the awful subjects of redemption and grace, as verities of universal interest, in comparison with which learning is folly, and art an infant's toy!*

* Those who have observed the direction taken by a certain

The comparison we have instituted between Science and Art is for the sake of distinction merely, not of depreciation. It regards only their

class of modern writers, popular among our intellectual youth, will readily agree with us that the exaltation of literature from its proper sphere, to be the professed regenerator and civiliser of our race, is a growing and enormous evil, prolific of infidelity in its most dangerous, because most flattering form. There are two phases of this delusion. The one presents to our admiration and worship the excellencies of work and science; and is embodied in certain popular and kindred theories of social and secular perfectibility. The teachers of this new "philosophy"—who offer it to the poor man in place of his religion—by insinuating the comparative unimportance of creed, and the superlative need of universal amity, viewed independently of God's Law and Gospel, make no value of that Christianity which was established at so great a cost, and for designs so high; and they utterly limit the views of mankind—whom they nevertheless extol with every species of adulation—to threescore years and ten terminating in dust and darkness. This doctrine is industriously spread among the labouring classes of society, by men of perverted talents, enslaved by a French philosophy of mingled scepticism and Socialism. The other manifestation of this spirit of atheism is apparently of German origin; and is the artistic and transcendental type of secularism. It consists in the idolisation of art upon the pedestal of religion. The latter is not boldly thrown aside, because too beautiful in itself, and too firmly rooted in the imaginations, if not in the hearts, of men: it is, therefore, made to enhance the former. Christianity—in the literature alluded to—supplies a time-honoured and widely-reverenced phraseology for the adornment of wild poetic ravings about the purity of the natural heart and the majesty of the human mind. Emerson, of America, is an author open to these objections; and, if we mention a transatlantic offender, it must be remembered that his writings are so popular in England, that this country may be

means ; for, the end of both being truth, dissimilarity must there cease. But some reader may still demur to the practical value of poetry. He has been wont to regard it as the antagonist of common sense. He knows that it principally consists of fictitious narrative ; and, reminding us that we have admitted so much, is ready to ask, How can it teach ? We might answer, Do not the fictions used in algebraical science express the strictest abstract truths ? But the analogy may be denied. Still we claim for poetry all the honour due to common sense, as presenting the perfect results of reason without its visible and tardy process. In the poet, reason acts like instinct ; for this faculty of reason, with which we are accustomed (from observing its operation in ordinary

said to have adopted his sentiments, and become accessory after the fact. Original and brilliant in style, and abounding in felicitous poetic analogies, his works have no moral drift : they produce no moral impression, as a whole ; or only impress us with the futility and vanity of substituting quaint conceits and coruscating thoughts for the inculcation of that great moral law under which we were created, and to which the Gospel promises to re-conform us. How much superior to these are the ethics of some of our own true poets,—Shakspeare himself among the number,—whose works give us glimpses of Divine truth that remind us that the writers are but agreeably rousing and informing our minds, and not divesting us of our moral accountability !

minds) to connect the idea of a slow and laborious process, is in its nature—like all spiritual acts— instantaneous. In creatures of pure intelligence—in angels, for example—reason is the immediate and unerring law of their nature, as a limited instinct is that of the unintelligent creation. The difference lies, not in the suddenness or the certainty of the one above the other; but in the consciousness belonging to the higher faculty, and absent from the lower. Thus (we may say) instinct is unconscious reason, reason is conscious instinct; with this immense advantage in the latter, besides its consciousness, that its range, instead of being limited to the necessities of a brief animal existence, is not bounded by anything less than an infinitude of objects and an eternity of experience. If there be any value in these remarks, they may go far to account for those subtile inferences, seemingly intuitive, which in the works of great poets are recognised as universal truths, remembered on a thousand occasions, and found applicable under outwardly varied circumstances. Strictly speaking, intuition belongs no more to the poet than to any other of our race: but experience

and observation, which in men of practical habits and of small reflection are so limited, transitory, or dormant, live actively in the exquisite organisation of poetical natures ; while the stores arising from each of these sources are indefinitely multiplied by the inferential faculty of their minds, which we have described as imparting the instantaneous certainty of instinct to the voluntary consciousness of reason. We are here reminded of the mental characteristics of *woman*, with whose sensitive intelligence the poet may claim honourable kindred : for, in both, the connexion of heart and brain appears to be so intimate, that it is difficult to think of them otherwise than the functions of one organ, having perceptions and feelings mysteriously interlaced, for the purposes of vivifying and re-acting. In *her* limited province and personal mission, on the one hand, and *his* power of reflection and abstraction on the other, may be found their circumstantial difference ; while in the acquisitive operation of their minds, sudden and sure, from slightest premises, lies their natural affinity.

We have not lost sight of our author. The con-

siderations adduced have, we think, a direct bearing upon the question of Wordsworth's literary merits, and indicate the radical defect of his higher poetry,—namely, its semi-didactic character. But, before citing for examination the poems alluded to, we beg the reader's further patience, during a brief inquiry in respect to the Moral Influence of Art.

With this object in view, we have entered at some length into the nature of poetry, carefully tracking its origin and development; and we think it surely follows, from the considerations advanced in regard to the natural history of this (in common with every other) art, that its influence is in character identical, and in force commensurate, with that of nature itself,—of which, in its every phase, it is the intellectual reflex. The grand impression, therefore, of any signal work of art, (or, that which it produces as a whole,) is similar to that arising from the study of nature, as it equally preserves the moral integrity of things, though discarding certain of their accidents; this general impression being, of course, independent of, though deepened by, the collateral pleasures of imitation, association, and the sensuous medium

of language, form, or colour. An appeal to the master-pieces of art seems to confirm this view: in the degree of their approach to perfection of truth, they elevate and inform the mind; while, in proportion as they yield expression to false taste or inconsistent thought, they mislead inferior judgments, and fail to satisfy the highest. Raphael is the greatest of painters, because most true to the spirit of nature in its highest manifestations: for the same reason he is the most moral of painters also. Mere grace of drawing and expression, however wonderful, would never have gained for him the pre-eminence he holds; but, the auxiliary beauties and resources of his art being by him made tributary to the exhibition of a pre-existing truth, his works remain for our admiration and delight, perfect in reflecting the perfection with which God made the world. Homer, as he faithfully embodied the actions, passions, and belief of heroic heathen Greece, presents a genuine poetic study, profitable in its degree: for, our account of poetry, as an intellectual transcript of creation and providence, allows of our deducing moral truth from erroneous creeds and mistaken pursuits among

men, no less than from the best-directed virtue,—as a natural philosopher takes equal interest in the causes and phenomena of volcanic fires, and those of invaluable springs of water. The excellence of ancient Greek art stands in manifest confirmation of this theory. The heathen theology and philosophy are finally superseded: why does heathen art remain so admirable, furnishing models—to the extent of their aim—for all succeeding artists? Simply because its authors were faithful to the genius of art, and so “held the mirror up to nature” that, in the glorious poetry and sculpture of Attica, we still see, as in a glass, the subdued image of Grecian life: fierce passions and warlike habits, tempered by a serene and sunny climate; uncertainty of creed, running into wild conjecture, and peopling with divinities all places from which a blessing or a curse might come; and, above all, a yearning after some ideal good, which, in the absence of a spiritual Revelation, found expression in luxurious beauty of form, and made perfect the triumph of mind over matter by moulding the very rock into the likeness of man, not in physical proportion merely,

but embodying to our eyes his immortality and hope. If Phidias must yield the palm of excellence to Raphael, it is because the dispensation of truth under which the latter flourished surpasses in moral grandeur the era of the former,—*imitation rising in value with the value of the object imitated.* In this view, the scope of modern art is grand and boundless. We are no longer limited to bodily proportion, strength, and beauty, for the expression of great ideas: the Phidian Jove is less sublime than the Cripple at the Gate Beautiful. If sculpture was adequate for the æsthetic utterance of an early heathen world, painting was the more copious language of a later and wider experience; while poetry, naturally the first, must remain the noblest medium of all, capable as it is of indefinite expression,

“And ever rising with the rising mind.”

The resources of poetic art are inexhaustible: progress, improvement, and discoveries in every age, do but furnish the substance of those grand shadows which, on its magic glass, delight a world wearied with utility, but finding in their originals no attractive charm. When we said that the chief

moral of true poetry might be compared to that which Science furnishes under the name of natural theology, we did not mean it to be inferred that the range of the former is limited to the subjects of the latter; but merely that, as Science consists in a faithful exposition of the phenomena of nature, so Art, when equally faithful to its original, produces convictions and emotions similar in kind, and may claim the same deference for its teaching. While *Science* is confined to the pursuit of elements and the detection of causation, it is the boast of *Art* that it takes the shape of every conceivable combination in nature. The former teaches us what creation necessarily is, independently of its lord; but the latter, following the steps of man with the fidelity of a shadow, reflects every phase and attitude of his condition, and out of the inferior world furnishes an harmonious back-ground to the picture. Thus poetry, uniform in its essence, has been widely varied in expression, and must be limited only by the ultimate experience of mankind. Thus poetry in Eden (who can doubt?) would celebrate the life of innocence; in songs and hymns extolling the greatness and goodness of God seen in the per-

fection of nature, and breathing in every note the fulness of paradisaical enjoyment. Thus (in times subsequent) poetry became successively pastoral, heroical, mythological; according to climate or condition, pacific, warlike, patriotic, domestic. And thus we may expect it to advance through every gradation of human society, till it shall finally echo the millennial worship, as it first embodied that of Paradise, and so complete the chain of harmony that runs parallel with all the gross conditions of our world, and is the high expression of its intellectual life.

It matters not, then, that (as we have sought to prove) the poet is no absolute creator; that imagination itself, soaring upon its strongest pinions, cannot get beyond the regions of an objective universe; that Art hath so little of her own to boast, that there is not a hue on her palette, not a note in her scale, not a word in her vocabulary, which owes not its significance and value to the stores of nature. Emphatically, GOD IS THE AUTHOR OF ALL. At the bottom of every human invention or design, we may read His indelible FECIT. Through the agency of philosophers and poets HE publishes

the intellectual riches of His kingdom ; and thus, originating in His greatness and resulting in His glory, all things are ever proclaiming Him to be the BEGINNING AND THE ENDING, THE FIRST AND THE LAST.

It may be urged that the history of Art, and the character of its acknowledged master-pieces, do not warrant the opinion we have expressed of its high moral tendency ; that instances may be adduced, both in painting and in poetry, in which, at the same time, the composition is faultless and the morality questionable. We suspect, however, that if such instances were brought forward, the perfection of their art would not bear a very severe scrutiny ; but that we should discover, in every work producing dangerous or hurtful impressions, a proportionate deviation from representative truth, which rejects what is partial as virtually false. But (it is asked) may not the evil in nature be reflected in art with evil consequences ? If the reflection be faithful, *no* ; for then the real deformity of vice, the essential beauty of virtue, must certainly appear with something like scriptural truth, the accessories involved in the use of harmony serving

the purpose, not of exaggeration, but of impression. To justify this unqualified expression of opinion, we may adduce even an extreme case in point,—the works of Hogarth, whose literal portraiture of vice and its concomitants is so ably indicated in an Essay by the late Charles Lamb. To that production we refer the reader, as proving, in an unanswerable manner, the high rank of Hogarth in his art, and his consequent claim to the honours of a great and moral painter. There is one brief passage, however, so confirmatory of the principle under review, that we must quote it here, premising that the impressions it records are due to the last print in *The Harlot's Progress*,—a series in which the painter has indeed extenuated none of the wretched circumstances concluding a riotous career: —“The misemployed, incongruous characters at the funeral, on a superficial inspection, provoke to laughter; but, when we have sacrificed the first emotion to levity, a very different frame of mind succeeds, or the painter has lost half his purpose. I never look at that wonderful assemblage of depraved beings, who, without a grain of reverence or pity in their perverted minds, are performing

the sacred exteriors of duty to the relics of their departed partner in folly, but I am as much moved to sympathy, from the very want of it in them, as I should be by the finest representation of a virtuous death-bed surrounded by real mourners, pious children, weeping friends,—perhaps *more*, by the very contrast. What reflections does it not awaken of the dreadful, heartless state in which a creature must have lived, who in death wants the accompaniment of one genuine tear! That wretch who is removing the lid of the coffin to gaze upon the corpse with a face which indicates a perfect negation of all goodness or womanhood—the hypocrite Parson and his demure partner—all the fiendish group—to a thoughtful mind present a moral emblem more affecting than if the poor, friendless carcass had been depicted as thrown out to the woods, where wolves had assisted at its obsequies, itself furnishing forth its own funeral banquet.”

Let us further test this theory of the moral influence of Art by an example taken from the Art of Poetry, with which our enquiry is immediately concerned. In this, too, we will take an extreme instance, such as would most eagerly

be quoted, in proof of the false and demoralising character of Poetry of the highest class. "Don Juan" has been styled "the greatest English poem produced in the present century." Now we may readily concede that it displays, in surpassing abundance, the poetical resources of Lord Byron; but we deny that it is a great poem at all; for, in common with all the productions of his Lordship,—who certainly had not the highest order of poetical intellect, nor was even faithful in the use of that with which he was entrusted,—it bears the character of *advocacy*, rather than of *inspiration*. As his other effusions are so many special pleadings for some particular form of vice, whether Pride, Misanthropy, or Unbelief, so this (being no exception from his rule of composition) is nothing more than a vivid *ex-parte* statement in behalf of Pleasure,—wherein all the lassitude, disappointment, humiliation, self-reproach, danger, and destruction, incident to a selfish and voluptuous career, are altogether banished from the view, and the better judgment is overborne by a constant appeal to the sensual part of our nature; or, if this be intermitted for a moment, (on a

principle not unknown to the brute creation,) our moral sense, whose voice is a whisper needing a serious silence to be heard, is confounded by a ribald wit that is "ingenious, wonderful, and good for nothing." We cannot deny the abundant riches of the author's imagery, the ripeness of his observation, his mastery of rhyme and rhythm, his fertility of wit, and his prodigal power of sarcasm. The poem in question is also remarkable for its felicity of expression, its truthfulness of detail, and its harmony of grouping; and from it might be selected a matchless series of pictures, characters, and sketches, which must separately influence the mind in an agreeable and improving manner. But if we consider the poem as a whole, and naturally look for that moral coherence with which all great works (the heathen not excepted,) are invested by virtue of their consistent truth, must we not pronounce it an utter failure? True, it is professedly unfinished, and some allowance may be granted on the score of incompleteness: yet so loose is the structure, and so unsatisfactory the aim, that its tissue of brilliant falsehoods may as well terminate where it does as in any possible

conclusion we may conceive. Yet the poetic faculty is continually at work; as certain bees, which revel only in the most noxious plants, use diligently their imbibing and secreting power, although the product is poison, and not honey.

In bringing this lengthened exordium to a close, and applying the principles adduced to the works of Wordsworth, it is proper to remark that those principles appear, on the first view, to regard only the style and burden of poetry in its epic walks; and that some poetic compositions necessarily want that grand *morale* which arises from absolute receptiveness on the part of the poet, and perfect *vraisemblance* on that of his work. A lyrical effusion, for example, is not easily tested by the same appeal to nature which is suggested by narrative or dramatic composition. In the latter cases the poet comes out of himself, and marshals his fellow-men in the order they observe in life; while in the former he sings immediately from his own heart, and the profounder the depths of individual feeling from which his sentiments arise, the more welcome and delighting is his strain. And yet, upon close examination, we shall

find that the excellence of both species of poetry depends upon the observance of that æsthetic rule upon which we have so much insisted; for the impassioned lyric must be as genuine and unargued an expression of personal (and, at the same time, universal) experience, as the narrative poem must be of human character developed in events. We have, therefore, elicited a principle common to all genuine poetry; namely, that it is *authoritative* and *oracular*, approving itself authentic by the response of our own nature, rather than by an appeal to force of argument.

II.

IN his poem of *The Excursion*, the genius of Wordsworth is exerted in its most sustained and serious manner; and, though only the middle portion of a threefold work, entitled *The Recluse*, (the remainder of which has been reserved for posthumous publication,) that portion is in itself of sufficient length and completeness to enable us to estimate, with tolerable accuracy, the value of the whole, as well as the author's claim to the highest honours of poetry. In length, indeed, *The Excursion* is equal to *Paradise Lost*; nor can it be considered as unfairly treated when brought to a nearer comparison with Milton's great poem, if we take into account the magnitude of its design, and the epic tone in which its subject is announced. That announcement is made in the first book of *The Recluse*, an extract from which is furnished by the author as a "prospectus of the design and scope of the whole Poem."

On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life,
Musing in solitude, I oft perceive
Fair trains of imagery before me rise,
Accompanied by feelings of delight,
Pure, or with no unpleasing sadness mixed ;
And I am conscious of affecting thoughts
And dear remembrances, whose presence soothes
Or elevates the mind, intent to weigh
The good and evil of our mortal state.
To these emotions, whencesoe'er they come,
Whether from breath of outward circumstance,
Or from the soul,—an impulse to herself,—
I would give utterance in numerous verse.
Of Truth, of Grandeur, Beauty, Love, and Hope,
And melancholy Fear subdued by Faith ;
Of blessed Consolations in distress ;
Of moral Strength, and intellectual Power ;
Of Joy in widest commonalty spread ;
Of the individual Mind that keeps her own
Inviolable retirement, subject there
To conscience only, and the law supreme
Of that Intelligence which governs all—
I sing :—“ fit audience let me find, though few.”

This enumeration of abstractions is surely not very promising as the theme proposed for a great poem ; but that our author thinks otherwise is evident from his invocation :—

Urania, I shall need
Thy guidance, or a greater Muse, if such
Descend to earth or dwell in highest heaven !

For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink
Deep, and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds
To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.
All strength, all terror, single or in bands,
That ever was put forth in personal form—
Jehovah—with His Thunder, and the choir
Of shouting angels, and the empyreal thrones—
I pass them unalarmed. Not chaos, not
The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
By help of dreams, can breed such fear and awe
As fall upon us often when we look
Into our minds, into the mind of man,—
My haunt, and the main region of my song.

“The mind of man.” We admit that this is an argument worthy to be preluded by an invocation so sublime. It was the argument of Homer, of Shakspeare, and of Milton. But the argument with them was that of the poet, not of the logician; a theme, but not a thesis. They exhibited as in a panorama, not dissected as in a map. In the present work, we already suspect that we are to have a “philosophical poem;” and that is an anomaly. True, the poetical dress is not a uniform: one poet is not the counterpart of another. Each is an independent source of light; and (if we may use the illustration of an inspired author) “there is

one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars." Consistent with this admission was our former reference to great but dissimilar examples: for not inferior to the solar splendour of Achilles is the moon-like grace of Eve; and not secondary to either is that grand constellation of characters in which Lear and Hamlet and Miranda are pre-eminently bright. We do not, then, require that a modern master-piece should have strong resemblance to some work long worshipped in the pantheon of art; but we expect that it will appeal to the same profound source of pleasure, be moulded by the same grand laws of taste, and, while the novel beauty of its expression invests it with a charm that is absolutely fresh, be yet perpetually delightful to the human mind by virtue of its consonance with human nature.

Having no intention of minutely analysing *The Excursion*, we shall willingly assume the reader to be acquainted with the poem itself, and with the slender narrative—for plot or fable it has none—upon which are threaded the large discourses of which it mainly consists. He may be reminded, however, that the place of fable is supplied, and a

title for the poem furnished, by an *excursion* described by the author as taken by himself, a retired pedlar, and a recluse who is called "The Solitary;" that between these generally, with sometimes the addition of an intelligent Vicar, occur, in series, conversations and disquisitions, varied by anecdote, rhapsody, prophecy, and alternating between pictures of humble life, and visions—more mystical, but neither so interesting nor so intelligible—of a moral paradise to be hoped for in the future. Now, the objections we are compelled to make against the poem are not confined to its imperfection of fable, though we believe *that* to be the primary and radical defect from which the others take their rise. The execution is itself unsatisfactory, and justifies in a powerful degree the theoretical objections we had conceived. If we have hitherto contended, *a priori*, against the probability of a grand philosophical poem, we now point to the concluded experiment, adventured by a man of undoubted genius, and are tempted to deny, *a posteriori*, the possibility of such production. It was a plausible idea, not seldom uttered in recent times, that as the spirit of the age was eminently scientific,

practical, and advancing, so it behoved the poet—ever reflecting back the present phase of things—to forego, as too childish for these masculine days, the romance and story with which our ancestral hearths were cheered, and to deal more largely in theories of human weal by which all classes of the community might be directly profited. As though poetry had never profited before! As though its work of instructing an attentive world should first begin when its attractive charm was for ever gone! and poetry only then deserve the name, when linked to the merest drudgery of prose! But—granting, for the sake of argument, that the theory may be sound after all—is the result triumphant? Alas, *no!* The execution (as we have said) is equally unfortunate with the design; we should deem it even more so, if the genius of the author had not so approved itself in other compositions that we are compelled to ascribe his failure in the present instance to an utterly mistaken choice. Patches of pastoral beauty are met with in the poem, such as, if separately framed, might hang immortally beside Theocritus and Landor; but, surrounded as they are by dreary metaphysics,

barren and interminable, how few will ever toil to reach them, though their refreshing loveliness will be then proportionally sweet ! Let us read together an example of these redeeming passages. It is taken from a vivid portraiture of peasant youth and heroism, concluding in an early grave.

The mountain-ash

No eye can overlook, when mid a grove
Of yet unfaded trees she lifts her head,
Deck'd with autumnal berries, that outshine
Spring's richest blossoms ; and ye may have marked,
By a brookside or solitary tarn,
How she her station doth adorn ; the pool
Glow's at her feet, and all the gloomy rocks
Are brightened round her. In his native vale
Such and so glorious did this youth appear ;
A sight that kindled pleasure in all hearts
By his ingenuous beauty, by the gleam
Of his fair eyes, by his capacious brow,
By all the graces with which Nature's hand
Had lavishly arrayed him. As old bards
Tell in their idle songs of wandering gods,
Pan or Apollo, veiled in human form ;
Yet, like the sweet-breathed violet of the shades,
Discovered in their own despite to sense
Of mortals ; (if such fables without blame
May find chance mention on this sacred ground ;)
So, through a simple rustic garb's disguise,
And through the impediment of rural cares,
In him revealed a scholar's genius shone ;

And so, not wholly hidden from men's sight,
In him the spirit of a hero walked
Our unpretending valley. How the quoit
Whizzed from the stripling's arm ! If touched by him
The inglorious football mounted to the pitch
Of the lark's flight, or shaped a rainbow curve,
Aloft, in prospect of the shouting field !
The indefatigable fox had learned
To dread his perseverance in the chase.
With admiration would he lift his eyes
To the wide-ruling eagle, and his hand
Was loth to assault the majesty he loved :
Else had the strongest fastnesses proved weak
To guard the royal brood. The sailing glede,
The wheeling swallow, and the darting snipe,
The sportive sea-gull dancing with the waves,
And cautious water fowl, from distant climes,
Fixed at their seat, the centre of the mere,
Were subject to young Oswald's steady aim,
And lived by his forbearance.

The French usurper threatens to invade our
shores, and the peasantry of England are speedily
enrolled in her defence ; among the rest, Oswald.
The narrator continues :—

Oft have I seen him, at some leisure hour,
Stretched on the grass, or seated in the shade,
Among his fellows, while an ample map
Before their eyes lay carefully outspread,
From which the gallant teacher would discourse,
Now pointing this way, and now that. " Here flows,"

Thus would he say, "the Rhine, that famous stream!
Eastward, the Danube toward this inland sea,
A mightier river, winds from realm to realm;
And, like a serpent, shows his glittering back
Bespotted with innumerable isles:
Here reigns the Russian, there the Turk; observe
His capital city!" Thence along a tract
Of livelier interest to his hopes and fears,
His finger moved, distinguishing the spots
Where wide-spread conflict then most fiercely raged;
Nor left unstigmatised those fatal fields
On which the sons of mighty Germany
Were taught a base submission. "Here behold
A nobler race, the Switzers, and their land,
Vales deeper far than these of ours, huge woods,
And mountains white with everlasting snow."

Disregarding our author's interruptions, let us
pass to the youth's concluding scene.

One summer's day—a day of annual pomp
And solemn chase—from morn to sultry noon
His steps had followed, fleetest of the fleet,
The red-deer, driven along its native heights
With cry of hound and horn; and from that toil
Returned, with sinews weakened and relaxed,
This generous youth, too negligent of self,
Plunged—'mid a gay and busy throng convened
To wash the fleeces of his father's flock—
Into the chilling flood. Convulsions dire
Seized him, that self-same night; and through the space
Of twelve ensuing days his frame was wrenched,

Till Nature rested from her work in death.
To him, thus snatched away, his comrades paid
A soldier's honours. At his funeral hour
Bright was the sun, the sky a cloudless blue —
A golden lustre slept upon the hills ;
And if by chance a stranger, wandering there,
From some commanding eminence had looked
Down on this spot, well pleased would he have seen
A glittering spectacle ; but every face
Was pallid ; seldom had that eye been moist
With tears, that wept not then ; nor were the few
Who from their dwellings came not forth to join
In this sad service, less disturbed than we.
They started at the tributary peal
Of instantaneous thunder, which announced
Through the still air the closing of the grave ;
And distant mountains echoed with the sound
Of lamentation, never heard before !

If the foregoing passages are not the best which could be selected from the poem, they are at least characteristic of our author's better manner. They also furnish a more than average specimen of his style, in a production which we think decidedly inferior in that particular to his minor compositions : for, the reader will not have failed to observe, even in this favourable extract, the substitution of a prosaic and feeble phraseology for that almost Dantesque simplicity and force in

which his noblest odes and sonnets are enshrined, like a Grecian divinity in a boldly-wrought Greek bust.

The blank verse of our author has never proved a very happy medium of his ideas; but in the lines on the Old Cumberland Beggar, in those written on the banks of the Wyë above Tintern Abbey, and in some few of his Inscriptions, a considerable success has been achieved, in the adaptation of rhythmical expressions to placid and congenial thoughts. Beyond this Wordsworth never rises. We have no intimations of a heavenward muse, balanced on harmonious pinions; and rising into her native element as majestically as the eagle mounts in a thousand rings toward the sun. We have no exhibition of a power of language like that which sustains Milton, when leading the flight of his fallen angel through "chaos and ancient night;" no triumph of versification like that poem of Coleridge, wherein the reflected greatness of Mount Blanc may challenge an eternity of future like its own. Equality of kind with these, of course, we do not look for. But the blank-verse poems of Wordsworth too

seldom furnish us with a similar mastery of rhythm for his appropriate purpose; while in *The Excursion* his tendency to prolixity, and to the substitution of rhetorical for poetic language, is confirmed by the didactic nature of his work. Even his sketches of natural scenery, often so novel, true, and Turner-like, are here obscured by this prosaic habit: no wonder, then, if the parts in which he more directly seeks to enunciate the philosophy of men and morals should prove vague, involved, and unintelligible. In illustration of both these faults, we will transcribe a passage commencing with the description of a mountain prospect and its phenomena at sun-setting, and then conveying the sentiments drawn forth on the occasion from the devout Priest, as spokesman of the poet and his party.

Alert to follow as the pastor led,
We clomb a green hill's side; and, as we clomb,
The valley, opening out her bosom, gave
Fair prospect, intercepted less and less,
O'er the flat meadows and indented coast
Of the smooth lake, in compass seen;—far off,
And yet conspicuous, stood the old church-tower
In majesty presiding over fields
And habitations, seemingly preserved

From the intrusion of a restless world
By rocks impassable and mountains huge.
Soft heath this elevated spot supplied,
And choice of moss-clad stones, whereon we couched
Or sat reclined; admiring quietly
The general aspect of the scene; but each
Not seldom over-anxious to make known
His own discoveries; or to favourite points
Directing notice, merely from a wish
To impart a joy, imperfect while unshared.
That rapturous moment ne'er shall I forget,
When these particular interests were effaced
From every mind!—Already had the sun,
Sinking with less than ordinary state,
Attained his western bound; but rays of light—
Now suddenly diverging from the orb
Retired behind the mountain-tops, or veiled
By the dense air—shot upwards to the crown
Of the blue firmament, aloft and wide;
And multitudes of little floating clouds
Through their ethereal texture pierced—ere we
Who saw, of change were conscious—had become
Vivid as fire; clouds separately poised,—
Innumerable multitudes of forms
Scattered through half the circle of the sky;
And giving back, and shedding each on each,
With prodigal communion, the bright hues
Which from the unapparent fount of glory
They had imbibed, and ceased not to receive.
That which the heavens displayed, the liquid deep
Repeated; but with unity sublime!

Let us pause a moment between the foregoing descriptive passage and its ensuing moral. Considerable power is manifested in these lines, composing a landscape-picture of much beauty. Sky and mountain scenery, among which the colours of a sun, already set, shift lingeringly in their reluctant flight, are vividly called up before us. And yet the charm of poetry is wanting. The delineation evidences our artist's skill, rather than his art; for art conceals itself in beautiful effects, while that which he has substituted in its place is only too apparent. The picture is fine; but the stages of its production may be traced too clearly, as though it were eliminated before our eyes, not there as by magic and in perfection. The palpable elaboration of its parts, while it evinces aptitude and power, gives evidence also of the limits of that power. Dante would have concentrated the passage in three lines: the language would have been at once more simple and more poetic, and the picture more distinctly realised—the whole resulting in a cabinet composition framed in every memory. If it be objected that we are critical, when we should be elevated and absorbed, ~~does~~

the fault, we ask, lie with ourselves, or with our author? The mood of his companions, and especially of the Priest, is indeed that of elevated rapture: but, if the real prospect may have justified his enthusiasm, does the poet's transcript condemn our stricture as impertinent.

There is one circumstance which has led us to consider well, before venturing those unfavourable remarks. It must be owned that with some of the most accomplished critics of the day, *The Excursion* is the favourite production of a favourite poet; and the ablest of them all, in his admirable treatise on *Modern Painters*, has adduced the conclusion of the very passage just quoted, as likely to defy the imitative powers of all but one excelling painter. "There is but one master," says he, "whose works we can think of while we read this; one alone has taken notice of the neglected upper sky; it is his peculiar and favourite field; he has watched its every modification, and given its every phase and feature; at all hours, in all seasons, he has followed its passions and changes, and has brought down and laid open to the world another

apocalypse of heaven." Now to these words we heartily subscribe. Turner as an artist bears close resemblance to Wordsworth as a poet; and yet it may be quite wrong to confound them in the same praise; the one may fall below his higher privilege of song, and the other transcend the ordinary limits of a scene; the poet may stoop to simple painting, and dictate language easily exchanged for colours, while the painter may catch some of the spiritual and transforming power of the poet, and both elevate and exhaust the utmost resources of his art. And as we believe it to be in the case before us, Wordsworth is the too literal counterpart of Turner: the compositions of the latter fully realise the elaborate descriptions of the former; but what is admirable in the landscape-painter is feeble and artificial in the poet. Turner has so well employed the limited materials of painting as to suggest some of the higher truths of poetry; but Wordsworth has contracted his poetic field to the sensuous objects of painting, and effected that with evident labour and purpose which should

spontaneously have risen from some brief and incidental touches.*

But let us hear further.

While from the grassy mountain's open side
We gazed, in silence hushed, with eyes intent
On the refulgent spectacle, diffused
Through earth, sky, water, and all visible space,
The Priest in holy transport thus exclaimed :

“ Eternal Spirit! universal God!
Power inaccessible to human thought,
Save by degrees and steps which Thou hast deigned

* No circumstance would sooner lead the author of this little essay to distrust his own conclusions, especially in the application of critical canons to works of high art, as the discovery that they were at seeming variance with the judgments of Mr. Ruskin. The treatise on Modern Painters is a treasury of artistic knowledge, full of sage rules applicable in spirit to every branch of art, and singularly valuable for the clear insight of a pure heart and mind into the book of nature, and the moral wisdom with which the most neglected works of God are therein interpreted and treated. The author has therefore made the explanation of the text,—first satisfying himself, and then endeavouring to show the reader, that the variance observable was *only* in seeming. He is gratified and assured by a belief that his theory of the moral influence of art is sanctioned by the authority of Mr. Ruskin, who, while contending for the divine significance of every natural object, as affording ever some faint traces of infinite goodness and perfection, is doubtless ready to admit a measure of the same influence and power as breathing from the canvas, if faithfully reflecting, by natural detail passing through a human medium, the mind and purpose of Him who is both the author and archetype of his creation.

To furnish ; for this effluence of Thyself,
To the infirmity of mortal sense
Vouchsafed,— this local transitory type
Of thy paternal splendours, and the pomp
Of those who fill thy courts in highest heaven,
The radiant cherubim,—accept the thanks
Which we Thy humble creatures, here convened,
Presume to offer ; we, who—from the breast
Of the frail earth, permitted to behold
The faint reflections only of Thy face—
Are yet exalted, and in soul adore !
Such as they are who in Thy presence stand
Unsullied, incorruptible, and drink
Imperishable majesty streamed forth
From Thy empyreal throne, the elect of earth
Shall be, divested at the appointed hour
Of all dishonour, cleansed from mortal stain.
—Accomplish then their number ; and conclude
Time's weary course ! Or if, by Thy decree,
The consummation that will come by stealth
Be yet far distant, let Thy word prevail,
O let Thy word prevail, to take away
The sting of human nature. Spread the law
As it is written in Thy holy book
Throughout all lands ; let every nation hear
The high behest, and every heart obey ;
Both for the love of purity, and hope
Which it affords to such as do Thy will
And persevere in good, that they shall rise
To have a nearer view of Thee, in heaven."

The Priest's address continues in a similar

strain; but our space will not admit of an extended quotation. The passage just transcribed is unexceptionable, and even fine to an uncommon degree, both in sentiment and expression. But, if we remark its connection and position in the poem before us, is it not also unsatisfactory and vague? The language is such as might be adopted by the most orthodox and evangelical Christian; yet considering the circumstances to which its utterance is due, and remembering the semi-heathen sentiments in which our author has too frequently indulged, we are reluctantly compelled to believe that the poet does not mean all that the language of his friend the Priest implies; and that he uses the theology of revelation rather as the highest and most popular morality of modern times, than as a spiritual and most holy religion, divinely vouchsafed for the exclusive guidance of mankind. It may be said, that there is a dramatic consistency and propriety in putting such language into the mouth of an English Vicar, upon whose imagination the vivid sunset may be supposed to act in a manner corresponding to his serious and devout employments. But this is only

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partially true; for dramatic consistency would demand a more individual portraiture, in the preceding parts of the poem, than is furnished in the account of the Pastor; and, even then, we should have to complain of the comparative isolation of both speaker and speech, in a lengthened work which is made up of many such, and upon the results of which (if any) they have no definite or special bearing. Indeed, the great fault of this poem lies in the isolation of its meritorious passages, and their little contribution to its effect as a whole; and we are persuaded that many who have perused it throughout, with a greater or less degree of pleasure, have closed the volume with a feeling of dissatisfaction amounting almost to disappointment. Yet these readers of *The Excursion* might not be able easily to specify its particular faults,—faults, indeed, of defect, rather than of commission; such as any intelligent reader of poetry may feel, though none may be able entirely to explain.

III.

THUS far we have had occasion for what may seem a disparagement of the acknowledged genius of Wordsworth; and the warmest admirers of that gentleman's poetry, among whom (we are aware) may be found many of the brightest ornaments of literature and criticism, will probably suppose us to be animated by a determination to contradict the growing opinion in his favour. This is, however, very far from being the case. With the unqualified admiration of the parties alluded to, we have, indeed, no sympathy; and that for the reasons—whether sound or otherwise—which we have deliberately set down. Our first duty is to conserve the highest interests of poetic art; and, in so doing, we have found reason for an unfavourable judgment upon our author's chief work. Wordsworth is not a poet of the highest class; and,—though it would have been invidious to bring him to the severe test of comparison with

the few great men, "serene creators of immortal things," who are highest in the applause of mankind, if a similar position had not been challenged for him by his disciples and admirers,—it was from that circumstance perfectly right, and even desirable, to do so. Let us not be indiscriminate in our tribute of praise; or the bulk of readers, with whom (after all) rests the ultimate award of fame, will instinctively hesitate to confirm a sentence which they feel to be unjust.

The merits of Wordsworth's poetry are neither few nor small. When unrestrained by those false theories of art which we have had occasion to lament, the native inspiration of the poet flows grandly into its appropriate channel; and, as it "wanders at its own sweet will," how charming is the diaphanous and tranquil stream of song! how redolent of nature and her transcendent perfections! It is pleasant to remember that the bulk of our author's poetry is of this description. Perhaps four volumes, out of the seven, may be said to challenge, for originality and attractive graces, comparison with the products of almost any single author. Though all rather imbued with

reflection than breathing passion, and none affording the slightest evidence of dramatic power, they are yet remarkable for variety of sentiment and corresponding interest of character. The abundant fertility of the poet's mind imparts, to his minor pieces, something of that prodigal charm which is characteristic of external nature. In the later editions we find them carefully classified by their author, and distributed under the intellectual heads to which they severally belong. This division is, however, in many instances more arbitrary than philosophical; or it is suggested by associations in the poet's mind, arising from circumstances of composition. In copying a few passages for the reader's entertainment, we shall therefore be guided by an independent principle of choice; and it shall be our endeavour to make such a selection of Wordsworth's poetry as may illustrate, more in detail, that theory of poetic art which we have already laid broadly down.

Our first shall be an example of the *impulsive* kind. Such, indeed, is the characteristic definition of *all* lyrical poetry; but the verses we are about to *transcribe* are the simplest of their class, as in-

spired by the simplest of natural objects, Before
remarking further upon them, we invite the reader
to join us in their perusal.

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils,
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the Milky Way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of the bay ;
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced, but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee ;
A poet could not but be gay
In such a jocund company :
I gazed, and gazed, but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought :

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude ;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

To many it may seem unnecessary to enter upon a defence of these simple lines. But we are persuaded that, although their truthfulness and beauty would be very generally acknowledged, there is yet a large class of readers, otherwise intelligent and not deficient in ordinary matters of taste, who are ready to cite this little poem (among others of the kind) as an instance of that childishness and trifling which they deem to be characteristic of Wordsworth's muse. In such persons there is probably a defective sensibility, which no teaching or reflection will entirely supply ; but, as unreasonable expectations have most likely contributed to their disappointment, they may be reminded with advantage of the origin and influence of impulsive poetry. We have already seen that the prime excellence of poetic art consists in its reproduction of nature in its every manifestation ; and that the almost infinite variety of natural objects guarantees the perpetual resources to which art lays claim. If this were borne in mind, we should not have so many animadversions on the inutility of poetry, *and the total absence of meaning in certain minor effusions.* The persons who so complain will de-

clare themselves amused by the characters, and edified by the *dénouement*, of a drama or metrical romance; but what instruction, warning, or delight (they ask) is furnished by a rhapsody about Daffodils, or an address to the Small Celandine? Yet the influence of these lyrical deliverances—charged as they are with a sentiment of gladness in natural beauty—is surely analogous to the less palpable influences of external life. Mental aliment may be compared to corporal; and as no lover of health will scorn the inhaling of a genial mountain-air on the ground that it is “unsubstantial,” so let these demurrers be reminded that pastoral lyric poetry supplies an atmosphere to the mind, most fitly toning it to sensibility and taste, and preparing it for a delicate appreciation of the nobler truths of art.

It may further illustrate these remarks to quote our author’s beautiful ode *To the Cuckoo*.

O blithe new-comer! I have heard,
I hear thee, and rejoice;
O cuckoo! shall I call thee bird,
Or but a wandering voice?

While I am lying on the grass,
Thy loud note smites my ear;

From hill to hill it seems to pass,
At once far off and near.

I hear thee babbling to the vale,
Of sunshine and of flowers ;
And unto me thou bringst a tale
Of visionary hours.

Thrice welcome, darling of the spring !
Even yet thou art to me
No bird ; but an invisible thing,
A voice, a mystery :

The same whom in my schoolboy days
I listened to ; that cry
Which made me look a thousand ways
In bush and tree and sky.

To seek thee did I often rove
Through woods and on the green ;
And thou wert still a hope, a love,
Still longed for, never seen.

And I can listen to thee yet,
Can lie upon the plain,
And listen till I do beget
That golden time again.

O blessed bird ! the earth we pace
Again appears to be
An unsubstantial faëry place,
That is fit home for thee !

*Surely to listen to these verses is, in effect, to
be transported to the poet's rest-place on the*

early summer grass, surrounded by every genial and inspiring sight and sound; and then to be borne back to our own dawning childhood, when nature was a dreamlike presence, because we unreflectingly enjoyed it,—not less dreamlike now, when memory yields us but the shadow of that shade. The sensations appealed to by the poem are of a delicate and transient kind, of which many readers are hardly susceptible; but surely all may so far appreciate the sentiment as to hear of its cordial reception without signs of impatience or contempt. For its admirers we would willingly cull other and still sweeter posies, from this part of our poet's cultured and dew-fed garden; but the limits of our space forbid. We can only indicate a few of the most pleasing. *She was a phantom of delight!* is a genuine and happy sketch; and one of kindred excellence is that commencing, *Three years she grew in sun and shower*. A few masterly strokes (of each it may be said) from the pencil of our artist-author, and, lo! how fine a creature stands before us! how suitable a back-ground waits upon the picture! *Louisa* is a creation of similar beauty; and the ballad of *Ellen Irwin*, or

the Braes of Kirtle, though belonging to another class of compositions, is characterised by the same simplicity and freedom.

To many of our author's minor poems we cannot extend the same admiration, for reasons which we may hereafter specify. It is sufficient to remark, in passing, that, though written like those mentioned, with a literal truthfulness to nature, they fail to produce the same pleasurable feeling, either from the meanness of their subject, or the unconquerable vulgarity of their associations. And be it here remarked, that such a fault rests entirely at the author's door. Nature is ever lovely; and it is almost an act of impiety to charge upon her the unsightly failure of our depicting powers. The true artist is no mechanical copyist: he shows the spiritual faculty within him, rather by the selection and disposition of important features, than by the laboured detail which vulgar painters bestow at random on those of least significance. The result he aims at is the communication of thoughts, whatever medium or subject he may employ; and if those thoughts be trivial or familiar, he knows *well that the mind* will be offended at the artistic

elaboration of common-place ideas. What should we think of a painted conversation, and that of the most trifling kind? Yet such is the absurdity too often met with in verses laying claim to the name of poetry; and of this unpleasing description are too many of our author's earlier pieces. Iterations of natural phenomena they may be, but expressions of the *spirit* of nature they certainly are not.

But the genius of Wordsworth is more true to itself, when exercised in more advanced species of composition. It is his besetting temptation, when dealing with familiar life, to mistake the literal and vulgar for those homely but universal truths which the æsthetic character of art admits in the humblest poetry, as it associates them with the highest. He is, therefore, least successful in that department of song on which his first claims to originality were founded. His lyrical ballads give him no title to a posthumous renown: many of them, indeed, that sustain their place in his collected works, are felt to be only so much carrion, borne upwards between the wings of his later and more heaven-ward genius. Writers of less *pretension and desert* are here superior to our author.

Gay's charming ballad of *William and Susan*, for example, is worth many such as *Alice Fell* and *The Sailor's Mother*. The latter two are fragmentary incidents, rather than pictures in brief; and have no more claim to admiration in their present state than would an isolated tree of Turner's, or a peasant singled out from one of his consummate landscapes. Occurring in important compositions, where their excellence of truth would be auxiliary and incidental, they would have proved effective in a double manner, as at once testifying the affluence of the author's mind, and contributing in their place and measure to the unity and completeness of his work. But, in their isolation, these pieces seem to demand an admiration and regard which they do not intrinsically merit; and there is a contrast, painfully obvious, between the deliberate purpose of their production and its inadequate results. Nor will their brevity sufficiently explain or excuse the fault. The ballad of *William and Susan* is equally brief; but at the same time its features are characteristic, not trivial; indicating, *in few lines*, the strength and mastery of a full-grown passion, and that passion swelling in a

sailor's breast, and evidencing itself in the earnest simplicity of a sailor's manner. The whole life of this British tar may be easily imagined from the poet's little song. We repeat, therefore, that the strength of Wordsworth is most displayed when the shackles imposed by his theory are broken by the force of his genius: for then, no longer mistaking the vulgar for the true, or limited by a fear of swelling into affectation when soaring from the low, he is seen to expatiate with a truly catholic delight over the boundless heritage of Nature. His reflections then are more natural and informed, and his language is more terse, expressive, and poetical. The severity of his style, which is apt to degenerate into baldness and *froidueur*, becomes animated and fruitful, suggestive, picturesque, and harmonious. We will quote a few lines from *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, in illustration of our author's better manner, of which it is highly characteristic.

Him from my childhood have I known ; and then
He was so old, he seems not older now.
He travels on, a solitary man,
So helpless in appearance, that for him

The sauntering horseman-traveller does not throw
With careless hand his alms upon the ground,
But stops, that he may safely lodge the coin
Within the old man's hat; nor quits him so,
But still, when he has given his horse the rein,
Towards the ancient beggar turns a look
Side-long, and half-reverted. She who tends
The toll-gate, when in summer at her door
She turns her wheel, if on the road she sees
The aged beggar coming, quits her work,
And lifts the latch for him that he may pass.
The postboy, when his rattling wheels o'ertake
The aged beggar in the woody lane,
Shouts to him from behind; and if perchance
The old man does not change his course, the boy
Turns with less noisy wheels to the road side,
And passes gently by, without a curse
Upon his lips, or anger at his heart.
He travels on, a solitary man;
His age has no companion. On the ground
His eyes are turned, and as he moves along,
They move along the ground; and evermore,
Instead of common and habitual sight
Of fields with rural works, of hill and dale,
And the blue sky, one little span of earth
Is all his prospect. Thus, from day to day,
Bow-bent, his eyes for ever on the ground,
He plies his weary journey; seeing still,
And never knowing that he sees, some straw,
Some scattered leaf, or marks which, in one track,
The nails of cart or chariot-wheel have left
Impressed on the white road,—in the same line

At distance still the same. Poor traveller!
 His staff trails with him; scarcely do his feet
 Disturb the summer dust; he is so still
 In look and motion, that the cottage curs,
 Ere he have passed the door, will turn away,
 Weary of barking at him. Boys and girls,
 The vacant and the busy, pass him by;
 Him even the slow-paced waggon leaves behind.

* * * * *

Then let him pass, a blessing on his head!
 And while in that vast solitude to which
 The tide of things has led him, he appears
 To breathe and live but for himself alone,
 Unblamed, uninjured, let him bear about
 The good which the benignant law of Heaven
 Has hung around him; and, while life is his,
 Still let him prompt the unlettered villagers
 To tender offices and pensive thoughts.
 —Then let him pass, a blessing on his head!
 And, long as he can wander, let him breathe
 The freshness of the valleys; let his blood
 Struggle with frosty air and wintry snows;
 And let the chartered wind that sweeps the heath
 Beat his grey locks against his withered face.
 Reverence the hope whose vital anxiousness
 Gives the last human interest to his heart.
 May never House (misnamed) of Industry
 Make him a captive! For that pent-up din,
 Those life-consuming sounds that clog the air,
 Be his the natural silence of old age!
 Let him be free of mountain solitudes;
 And have around him, whether heard or not,

The pleasant melody of woodland birds.
Few are his pleasures ; if his eyes have now
Been doomed so long to settle on the earth
That not without some effort they behold
The countenance of the horizontal sun,
Rising or setting, let the light at least
Find a free entrance to their languid orbs.
And let him, *where* and *when* he will, sit down
Beneath the tree, or by the grassy bank
Of highway side, and with the little birds
Share his chance-gathered meal ; and, finally,
As in the eye of Nature he has lived,
So in the eye of Nature let him die.

This is a fine poetic study ; painted with uncommon breadth and vigour, full of expressive detail, and wonderfully realising to the mind its grand impersonation of old age. From this picture, as from the life, we see how decay encroaches upon the most masculine of men, makes them half-conscious recipients of natural blessings which they once inherited and enjoyed, and causes them to approximate, by visible degrees, to the oblivion and silence of that dust into which they must shortly be resolved. The contemplation of an object so affecting is not less salutary than the perusal of a death's head in a hermitage ; and yet — *here is the marvel of consummate genius* — we

are even more attracted by its beauty than persuaded by its pregnant truth. Indeed, the sense of beauty is direct and predominant ; the impression of truth, collateral and indefinable. For—be it observed—the mind of the poet is not disturbed by a painful or personal sympathy with the beggar's actual condition, but dwells with complacency on its picturesque and sensuous associations. What would be unpardonable, because misplaced, in a philanthropic essay, is an absolute merit in this gem of art. The poet is confessedly indulging his own luxurious sense of the relations existing between Man and Nature, and he finds great delight in rehearsing them for the reader's admiration ; so that the very blessings he invokes upon the hale old man have reference more to his own pleasure in contemplating them from without, than to the personal advantage of their object. One word for the beggar is followed by two for the poet himself. Thus when he prays,

Let him be free of mountain solitudes,
And have around him, *whether heard or not*,
The pleasant melody of woodland birds —

—for what purpose, it may naturally be asked, i

this melody desired, which cannot penetrate the errant old man's ear? Simply that it may charm the ear of *his* fancy who indulges in the picture. It is, in short, a betrayal, not unintended, of the fact that this venerable figure is summoned into the poet's presence, not to receive alms and commiseration, but to minister serene and high delight, by eliciting the sympathies of a fine-toned intellect, while grouping around his own unaided human majesty those accessories of Nature which proclaim at once his headship and mortality.

We cannot but esteem the classical poems of Mr. Wordsworth highly successful. This was to be expected from the general purity of his taste, and the antique simplicity of his mind; and, although it has been said that he is pre-eminently the poet of the nineteenth century, an attentive perusal of his works has led us to a different opinion. Let the claim to such distinction, if it be worth asserting, be preferred by some popular genius, whose works more strikingly reflect the times. Wordsworth could not sustain it, and does *not need it*. *He appeals to all reflective and emotional minds, and deals successfully with much of*

the conscious experience of mankind: but as he never, on the one hand, evinces that individualising power which makes the dramatist transcend the limited sphere of his own condition, and have sympathy with widely-varied characters in untried circumstances; so, on the other, he is equally distinguished from the surface-painter of society, who is skilful in the delineation of costume, or felicitous in the expression of national humour. He occupies that serene and middle region which lies below the third heaven of poetry, consisting of the sublimated passion of the human heart, and above the grosser cloud-land of social phases, shifting and uncertain. He breathes an atmosphere of sensational intelligence: he is seldom rapt into prophecy, and never descends to satire or good-natured mirth. Hence the fabulous stories of Greece and Rome are admirably suited to his muse; and we cannot but regret that he who has written with so much truthful pathos in *Laodamia*, and transfused so grand a moral into the *Ode of Dion*, should not have more often selected such themes of classical significance and beauty.

The mental characteristics just remarked have

largely contributed to the excellence of our author's sonnets. Of these we had intended to treat at some length, as being the noblest specimens of their class ever furnished to the world of literature by any single mind; but our limits, already exceeded, oblige us to defer their full consideration to some future opportunity. In the mean time we will simply indicate a few of the distinguishing merits of those before us.—They have first, then, all the beauties *peculiar* to that form of composition. Independently of the skill which overcomes with apparent ease the most difficult exercise of verse, the sonnet demands from its author a dignity of thought or sentiment which shall deserve the separate attention of the mind, and which—perfect in its unity as a whole—shall admit of a gradual advance to a full and gentle climax; being carefully distinguished from the epigram by the serious beauty of its measure, and the absence in its close of a witty, pointed, or abrupt surprise. These conditions are faithfully complied with in every series of Wordsworth's sonnets. But while the rigid *critic* is satisfied with the application of these *restrictive canons*, the tasteful reader is further

delighted by that nobility of sentiment, precision of language, access of affluent subsidiary thoughts, and culminating line in conclusion, which distinguish these noble compositions of our author. They remind him, sometimes of a richly tessellated pavement, of which the diamond-figured parts are fashioned into one large star, and concentrate to a point; and sometimes of a decorated arch, in which the union of stability and grace becomes perfect as the final key-stone drops into its appropriate place. It is difficult to select from four hundred specimens that lie before us, each possessing some novel and attractive thought; but let the following serve.

TO ————— IN HER SEVENTIETH YEAR.

Such age how beautiful! O lady bright!

Whose mortal lineaments seem all refined

By favouring nature and a saintly mind

To something purer and more exquisite

Than flesh and blood; when'er thou meet'st my sight,

When I behold thy blanched unwithered cheek,

Thy temples fringed with locks of gleaming white,

And head that droops because the soul is meek,

Thee with the welcome snowdrop I compare;

That child of winter, prompting thoughts that climb

From desolation toward the genial prime; —

Or with the moon conquering earth's misty air,

And filling more and more with crystal light

As pensive evening deepens into night.

We must limit ourselves to one more sonnet. Passing by many of well-known excellence, because they *are* well known.—among which we may mention that *On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic*.—we transcribe with pleasure a noble and pious breathing of Michael Angelo. admirably rendered by our author.

TO THE SUPREME BEING.

The prayers I make will then be sweet indeed,

If thou the Spirit give by which I pray :

My unassisted heart is barren clay,

That of its native self can nothing feed :

Of good and pious works Thou art the Seed.

That quickens only where Thou sayest it may :

Unless thou show to us Thine own true way,

No man can find it : Father ! Thou must lead :

Do Thou, then, breathe those thoughts into my mind

By which such virtue may in me be bred

That in Thy holy footsteps I may tread :

The fetters of my tongue do thou unbind,

That I may have the power to sing of Thee,

And sound thy praises everlastingly.

To instance every variety of beauty occurring in Wordsworth's sonnets would be to transcribe the whole. We are happy, however, (as this is impossible,) to be able to refer the reader to their collection in a single volume, published by Mr. Moxon : a volume which deserves almost daily

contemplation, and than which there are few poetic treasures richer in axiomatic wisdom, and in pure and graceful sentiment.

In glancing back at these hasty pages, we are made aware—not of any *positive injustice* done to the venerable poet of Rydal, but—of the *imperfect justice* rendered to his merits. This was the unavoidable result of the comparative brevity imposed upon us: for, how inadequate are the limits of even a lengthy article to the exposition and illustration of a career so remarkably prolonged, and so entirely devoted to the muse! We have (for example) been compelled to omit all mention of what is, in some respects, the most able and original production of our author—his Ode entitled *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*. To dismiss it in a paragraph, with a fragment of quotation, would have been intolerable to ourselves, and confounding to our readers. We prefer to await some future occasion of presenting it unbroken. Considering these imperative omissions, we must admit that the genius of Wordsworth is of a character even more commanding and impressive than in these

pages it appears ; for, if we have passed unquoted those few poetic failures which have exposed him to the ridicule of detracting wits, how much larger is the number of his unmentioned beauties, occurring in a hundred delightful pieces ! It may be true that no one of his performances, separately considered, is equally striking in effect with certain single works of Byron or Shelley, or evinces poetic gifts so remarkable ; but we must esteem unrivalled, and commend with more than ordinary praise, that intellectual energy and moral persistence which accumulated, systematically, slowly, and triumphantly, so grand a series of noble poems, in the praise of virtue and to the improvement of mankind.

FINIS.







